A. **Guest Lecturer** will discuss issues in the translation and interpretation of Chinese poetry through the poem below. (In section “C” that starts on p. 2, choose any poem that interests you, and prepare a comment or question about it.)

Xie Tiao (464–499) “Lying Sick in my Commandery, I Present this Poem to Shen of the Department of State Affairs”

1 Huaiyang guarded the state “by the crook of its arm,” a 淮陽股肱守
Still, one could “lie there in high-cushioned ease.” b 高臥猶在此
All the more so in the curve of these southern hills— 情復南山曲
How does it differ from perching in deep reclusion? 何異幽棲時

5 Cloudy skies on end have enriched the harvest season, 連陰盛農節
Sedge rain hats mass in ripe fields to the east. 簇笠聚東菑
My tall pavilion stays shut throughout the day, 高閣常晝掩
On “weed-grown steps” c contentious words are few. 荒階少諍辭

9 Rare bamboo mats refresh the summer chamber, 珍簟清夏室
Delicate fans stir up a cooling southwest breeze. 輕扇動涼颸
Fine bream there is, that could be offered to a guest, 嘉魴聊可薦
Green-ant wine too, which I serve all alone; 綠蟻方獨持
Summer plums whose crimson fruit is steeped in water, 夏季沉朱實
Autumn lotus roots split open to silky threads. 秋藕折輕絲

15 Will happy times ever be allowed us again? 良辰竟何許
For long I have dreamed of the “fine date” [of our reunion]. d 夙昔夢佳期

17 My “sitting and whistling” e have added up to nothing, 坐嘯徒可積
In this time I’ve been governing, already a full year. 爲邦歲已朢
“Music and song” f were in the end adopted by none, 弦歌終莫取
Rubbing my desk, I can only laugh at myself. 撫機令自嗤

Allusions

a) *History of the Han*: “Ji Bu was Hedong’s governor. Summoning Bu to court, the emperor [Xiaowen, r. 179–157 BC] said, ‘Hedong is my thigh-and-forearm commandery. It is for this reason I have summoned you [to return there].’”

b) Ibid., “When Ji An was appointed governor of Huaiyang, he prostrated himself and would not accept of the seal of office. The emperor [Wudi, r. 141–187] said, ‘Do you look down upon Huaiyang? I observe that officials in Huaiyang have not been worthy [of this office] but now I find someone of your uniquely weighty prestige, [I think] you could govern the place lying in bed.’”

c) Steps overgrown with weeds or moss conventionally led into the quarters of an abandoned palace lady.

d) A “fine/auspicious date” refers conventionally to a day that lovers plan to meet.

e) “Sitting and whistling” describes an idle official who does nothing. Or, the whistling can be understood as a Daoist exercise used to develop one’s inner vitality—the qi.

(f) From the *Analects*: Confucius was very pleased to hear the sounds of “music and song” when visiting a small town administered by one of his disciples but teased the disciple for exercising sagely rule in such an obscure place by saying, “If you’re only chopping off the head of a chicken, why do you need an ox-cleaver?”

B. **Formation of the Literatus**: Wenren 文人 = a man of letters, literatus; study of a canon & civil service exams; meanings of wen 文 as “pattern, design, writing, literature”; mythical & historical origin of writing; the Chinese poet as a “seer,” someone who interprets the patterns of an uncreated universe that is called the “self-thus” (vs. Western concept of poet).
C. Other Poems for discussion

1) “Singing of My Feelings,” no 1 of 80, by Ruan Ji (210–263)

   1 It is the middle of the night and I cannot sleep,
      I sit up to strum my singing lute.
      The bright moon shines on my thin curtains,
      A pure breeze blows against my breast.
   5 In the distant moors a solitary goose cries,
      As swooping birds sing in the northern wood.
      Back and forth I pace: what more is there to see?
      Sad thoughts wring my lonely heart.

2) “Twenty Poems after Drinking Wine” no.5, by Tao Qian (365–427)

   1 I built a cottage in the realm of men,
      Yet there is no sound of passing horses or carts.
      You ask, sir, how this could be?
      When the mind’s remote, the place is naturally far.
   5 Picking chrysanthemums below the east hedge,
      In the distance, I catch sight of South Mountain.
      Mountain vapors are beautiful in the twilight,
      Flying birds join together in going home.
   9 In these things there is true meaning,
      I’d like to explain it but have forgotten the words.

   Ll.5-6. Chrysanthemum petals steeped in a brew were thought to prolong life. South Mountain could be an actual mountain but is also in image of endurance and longevity. L.10. Zhuang zi: “Where can I find a man who has forgotten all words? I’d like to have a word with him!”

3-4) Poem & response by Wang Wei and Pei Di (b.716). How does Pei’s verse correlate with the contents of Wang’s poem?


   Wang: The birds fly away
      into infinite space:
      Over the whole mountain
      returns the splendour of autumn.
      Ascending and descending
      Hua-Tzu hill,
      I feel
      unbounded bewilderment and lamentation.

   Pei: The sun sets,
      the wind rises among the pines.
      Returning home,
      there is a little dew upon the grass.
      The reflection of the clouds
      falls into the tracks of my shoes,
      The blue of the mountains
      touches my clothes.
5) “Deer Enclosure” by Wang Wei (701–761)

1- Empty mountain no see man

空山不見人

2- Only hear man talk echo

但聞人語響

3- Reflected light enters deep woods

返景入深林

4- Again shines blue/green moss upon

復照青苔上

On the empty mountain, I see no men,

Kōng shān bú jiàn rén

I hear only echoes of their talk.

Dàn wén rén yǔ xiāng

Reflected light enters the deep woods,

Făn jǐng rù shēn lín

And shines again upon blue-green moss.

Fù zhào qīng tái shàng

Below are examples of “regulated verse” (lüshi), a highly structured form of octave verse that was fully developed during the eighth century of the Tang dynasty. A rule of lüshi is that the two lines in each of the middle couplets (3-4; 5-6) must observe syntactic parallelism while being semantically contrastive.

6) “The Temple of Gathered Fragrance” by Wang Wei—regulated verse

1 I do not know the Temple of Gathered Fragrance

For several miles, entering cloudy peaks.

Ancient trees, paths without people;

Deep in the woods, where is the bell?

Noise from the spring swallows up lofty rocks,

The color of the sun chills green pines.

Toward dusk by the curve of an empty pond,

Peaceful meditation controls poison dragons.

OR: Noise from the spring is swallowed up by lofty rocks, The color of the sun is chilled by green pines.]

Line 8: “Poison dragons” are the illusions and passions that stand in the way of enlightenment. NOTE: I have highlighted the central couplets of regulated poems.

7) “Restless Night” by Du Fu (712–770)

1 The cool of bamboo invades my room,

Moonlight from the fields fills the corners of the court.

Dew gathers, beading into drops.

Scattered stars, now there, now gone.

A firefly threading the darkness makes its own light,

Birds at rest on the water call to each other.

All these lie within the power of the sword,

Powerless I grieve as the clear night passes.

space—external

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time—internal

8) “Pavilion for Travelers” by Du Fu

1 An autumn window, still daybreak’s color,

Leaf-stripped trees, once again the tall wind.

Then the sun comes out beyond cold mountains,

And the river flows on through last night’s fog.

In our holy court there is no creature cast aside,

Frail and sick, I have become an old man.

How many experiences in this remainder of life

Will be blown and scattered with the rolling tumbleweed?
9) “Seeing off a Friend” by Li Bo (701–762)

1 Green hills slope from the northern wall,
   White water rounds the eastern city.
   Once parted from this place
   The lone tumbleweed drifts ten-thousand miles.

5 Drifting clouds—an old traveler’s will;
   Setting sun—an old friend’s heart.
   Wave hands and let us take leave now,
   Hsiao-hsiao our hesitant horses neigh.

10) “Listening to a Monk from Shu Playing the Lute” by Li Bo

1 A monk from Shu, carrying a jeweled lute,
   Came down from the west peak of Mount Omei.
   As he raises his hands to play for me,
   I seem to hear “pine sounds” from a thousand glens.

5 Flowing streams cleans the heart of a traveler,
   The dying strains fade into the first bells of frost.
   Dusk comes unnoticed over the green hills,
   Autumn clouds begin to darken layer upon layer.

Ll.5-6: Flowing streams: Zhong Ziqi, friend of the lute player Bo Ya, could tell by his music whether he was thinking of flowing streams or towering mountains. Frost bells: Legend says that the bells on Mount Feng are so perfectly keyed that they ring out on their own when the first frost falls. Metal = the element of autumn.

11) “Calling upon a Daoist Priest on Wearing-the-Sky-Like-a-Hat Mountain but Failing to Find Him” by Li Po. How does this poem differ from #6, Wang Wei’s octave about visiting a Buddhist temple?

1 A dog barks amid the sound of water;
   Peach blossoms, dew-tinged, take on a deeper hue.
   In the dense woods at times I glimpse a deer,
   Beside the brook at noon I hear no bell.

5 Wild bamboos divide the blue haze;
   Tumbling waterfalls hang from a green cliff.
   No one can tell me where you are,
   Saddened I lean against one or two pines.

12) “East of Lu Commandery, Sending off Tu Number Two [Fu] at Stone Gate Mountain” by Li Bo trans. by Elling Eide

1 Drunk at our parting, now how many days?
   Our view from this height is all terrace and pools.
   Why should we talk of the Stone Gate Road?
   We still have another gold flagon to try.

5 Autumn waves fall on the River Ssu,
   Sea colors brighten the To-and-Fro Mountain.
   The far flying tumbleweeds go separate ways,
   But first let us empty these cups mid the trees.

13) “Untitled” by Li Shangyin (813–858)

1 “Coming” is an empty word; going, you leave no trace,
   Moonlight slants over the roof; bells strike the fifth watch.
   Dreaming of long separation, I can hardly summon my cries,
   Hurried into writing a letter, I cannot wait for the ink to thicken.
5 The candle’s light half encircles the gold kingfisher [quilt].
Musk perfume subtly permeates the embroidered lotus [bed-curtain].
Young Liu already resented the distance of Peng Mountain.
Now ten-thousand more Peng Mountains arise!

Line 7 refers to Emperor Wu of the Han (Liu Zhe) who, through a Daoist magician, managed to
glimpse from behind a curtain the shadow of his beloved concubine, the deceased Lady Li.
Mount Peng is in the Eastern Sea and the land of the immortals.

14) “Recalling Old Times at Mianchi: Harmonizing with the Rhymes of [my brother] Su Che” by Su Shi (1037–1101)

1 Do you know what it’s like – human life everywhere?
   It must be like a wild goose flying, then treading slushy snow.
   On the slush perchance it leaves the tracks [wen] of its claws —
   Then soars off, who can tell whether bound east or west?

5 The old monk is dead now; a new pagoda is raised.
   On the ruined walls of his cell, no way to find those poems we made.
   But the rocky trail of that day-do you remember it still?
   How the road was long, we were worn out, the lame donkey brayed?

15) To the tune: “Water Clock” by Wen Tingyun (fl. 859)

1 The stars grow few,
   The night-drummers cease,
   Orioles call beyond the blind as the moon sinks into dawn:
   Dew heavy on the willows,
   And all the courtyard heaped with fallen flowers.

7 Up in her empty chamber,
   Leaning at the lattice rail,
   Is one forlorn as ever she was last year.
   Spring’s on the wane,
   But longing is endless,
   And bygone joys like something in a dream.

16) To the tune: “Bodhisattva Coiffure” by Li Yu (937–978)

1 In paradise Palace a Tiantai beauty
   Is taking a nap in Painted Hall,
   And no one talks.
   She moves her pillow:
   Black shines her hair as a blackbird’s feathers;
   From her flowered dress one senses strange perfumes.

7 As I tiptoe up, a pearl jewel moves,
   And she awakes from a dream of mandarin ducks.
   On her serious face a small smile gathers:
   We watch each other in endless love.

L.l, Spirits and immortals, including divinely beautiful maidens, reside in the depths of Mount Tiantai,
the most sacred of China’s mountains.
17) “To the tune: Dream Song” by Li Qingzhao (1081?–1149), a female poet

Often I remember the evening on the creek
When wine flowed in the arbor and we lost our way.
It was late; our boat returning after a happy day
Entered by mistake a patch of clustering lotus—
As we hurried to get through,
Hurried to get through,
A flock of herons, startled, rose to the sky.

18) “To the tune: Telling of Innermost Feelings” by Li Qingzhao

1 Night found me so flushed with wine,
I was slow to undo my hair;
The plum petals still stuck to a dying spray.
Waking up, the scent of wine stirred me from spring sleep;
My dream once broken, there was no going back.

6 Now it’s quiet,
the moon hovers above,
the kingfisher blinds are drawn.
Still: I feel the fallen petals,
Still: I touch their lingering scent,
Still: I hold onto a moment of time.


1 Cool of dawn, cool of evening—trees like canopies;
The rich, dark green of a thousand hills appears beyond the clouds.
Unclear and so faint, a fragrant rain; blue-green hazily swelling;
Glossy fat leaves and clustered flowers shine against arched gate.

5 Still waters of the golden basin shake ripples of emerald,
Aging spring light, heavy and somber—no more breaking loose in flight;

7 Fallen reds and ruined calyces in the darkness scattered about.

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Poetry (most of the translations are from these books):


On the Qin (“Lute, Zither”)
